# "I Really Enjoy the Hectic Multitude of Jobs I Get to Complete in Any One Day"

**Gavin Buckingham**

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**Abstract** Gavin Buckingham tells us about his research and current academic position in his interview and shares some lessons he learned along the way. He suggests that getting experience with the academic roles beyond research, such as teaching and supervising, can be helpful in determining if academia will be a good fit. Gavin also moved after his first faculty position, and we discuss factors that contributed to this decision. PhD students do not need to define their career based on their doctoral research but rather consider that their environment and colleagues will change as they move along, and this can be used as an opportunity to change the research as well. Becoming involved in university-level committees early on can also be a useful way to gain a better understanding of university decision-making.

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## Chris: Can you introduce yourself and tell me a bit about your current position?

Gavin: I'm a cognitive psychologist by training with an interest in how humans combine their sensory information with prior knowledge to experience and interact with the world around them. I'm currently a senior lecturer in the Department of Sport and Health Sciences at the University of Exeter, where I'm part of the Human Movement Science research group and I head up the Object Interaction Lab.

## What was the focus of your PhD?

I conducted my PhD at the University of Aberdeen in the Psychology department where I did my undergraduate studies. My PhD supervisor (Dr. David Carey, now at Bangor) was also my BSc dissertation supervisor and got me really interested in the question of what it means to be right handed and why left handers exist! My PhD focused on the question of how people control their attention, with its single point of focus, during tasks which require you to use both of your hands at the same time (which, when you think about it, is almost everything you do with your hands!). There is an old idea that you are biased toward the rightward hand's task (or the right side of space) when performing these bimanual tasks, and this asymmetry might be what underpins the eventual journey to later-life right handedness. I used behavioral motion tracking studies to try and infer where attention was during tasks where you had to point toward visual targets with each hand simultaneously, finding some evidence that attention does shift toward the right during bimanual tasks for right handers. Left handers show no such asymmetry, which is pretty much what you'd expect from the theory (if you are really interested, let me know!)

## As you were finishing your PhD, what were you thinking about your career plans?

I was pretty sure I was going to do a postdoctoral position somewhere. There was nothing else on my horizon except for an academic career. I applied for a few positions without any luck and then stumbled across a Commonwealth scholarship which would provide a year's worth of funds to work in a Commonwealth country. Handily, my PhD supervisor's PhD supervisor was a professor at the University of Western Ontario in Canada. I wrote the application but just missed the cut. Luckily, someone else above me dropped out and I got their spot, so off to Canada I went!

## Can you tell us a bit about what day-to-day life is like in your current position?

Incredibly varied! The one constant is meetings – meetings with groups of colleagues as part of a committee (I am a member of about five committees, each of which meets around once per term), one-to-one meetings with PhD students (which I try to do weekly), meetings with undergraduate dissertation students, meetings with students who want help with their coursework, ad-hoc meetings with colleagues and/or the boss. So even this "constant" changes all the time. It's quite satisfying though to be able to jump from one task to another and feel like you are somewhat important to a range of different things. In between meetings I'm preparing for the next meeting, getting ready for teaching, dealing with email inquiries (usually from students), working on writing papers/grants, or fiddling with some technical job in the lab (the ultimate guilt-free procrastination). While this might not seem that satisfying, I really enjoy the "keeping all the balls in the air" aspect to the job and staying (just about) on top of everything that I need to do. Balls, of course, get dropped, but it is rarely a major problem for anything other than your self-esteem.

## If someone currently finishing their PhD was considering a similar position as you have now, how might they decide if it would be a good fit?

I'd ask if they've had a chance to experience some of the other aspects of the job – namely, teaching, marking, supervising, and organizing. Typically in a PhD, there's not much exposure to the wider world of academia outside of your thesis – maybe the supervision of the occasional undergraduate project student, but that does little to prepare you for the day-to-day life of an academic which does, at first, feel incredibly chaotic. But if you are able to manage to ask for help when needed and are able to notice when you are sinking a bit, those are important skills to have for the job.

## What are some aspects of the job that you think a PhD student would be particularly unprepared for?

First, how long it takes to prepare teaching. If you are preparing something from scratch, even in a topic you know back to front, it's a real challenge to put it into a format which (1) fits the time you have to fill and (2) is something more interesting than 44 hours of you lecturing in front of a PowerPoint of words. Adapting someone else's teaching is almost worst – second guessing what they'd say, disagreeing with their structure, and trying to figure out the narrative that goes with their visual. I'd always recommend starting from scratch. The second major issue is that you are, functionally, no longer a researcher in the same way you were before. You don't have a project. You oversee a load of projects. Some of these you won't be all that invested in, but they still require your full attention. So you learn the requisite knowledge in a far shallower way to have enough time to do all the other things you have to do. Finally, as alluded to above, the shifting of mental gears from one project to another project to an administrative task to a stats question…. This is really quite a change from (at least my) PhD experience, where I was able to just get my head down and focus on something all day long. Days like that are fleetingly rare for me since starting as a lecturer.

## I know you've written some blog articles giving advice for new lecturers/assistant professors, can you tell us a bit about those?

The blog started off when I moved to my second lectureship and made me realize that it was a lot easier the second time around to start again without so many of the worries that plagued me the first time around. So I first started documenting to myself what I thought didn't go well the first time around in terms of swallowing up time and mental energy (mostly boring stuff, like documenting hardware setup). Then I noticed that I actually had lots of thoughts about this. Lots. And I actually really enjoyed writing this sort of content – no need to worry about drafts or proofreading or a narrative or anything like that – just the ideas in my head falling out of my fingers. So I started off just writing about what you have to do to set up a lab and then going through my own experiences of the other really difficult parts of starting out as a lecturer (coping with the supervisory responsibilities of a large number of undergraduate dissertation students, supervising PhD students, applying for funding, etc.). But because I love giving advice to people, it inevitably transitioned into a more general-purpose blog aimed at early-career academics of all stripes, on topics which I felt I had something to say. Some of these were very reactive to a situation I had just been through which wasn't really part of the job description (e.g., the huge amount of pastoral care duties you find yourself undertaking) or to questions which a colleague had asked me ("how do you prepare to be the internal examiner for a PhD thesis?"). It's been a great experience though, that got me invited to give

a presentation at a workshop for early-career researchers and to write an article for *Times Higher Education* – both things which I mention on promotion, funding, and fellowship applications fairly regularly.

## It would be great to hear some of this advice! It would be great to get a summary of a few of these, along with details on where to find the full articles. Can you give us an overview of workload and the responsibilities that go with being in a faculty position?

The main shift from PhD student or postdoctoral research to faculty is the responsibility and decision-making aspects. When you're only working on your own project, you have to make decisions about your own research. As faculty, you're making or helping others make decisions about their own research projects, sometimes on a small scale (design choices for individual research projects for undergraduate students) or at a large scale (what direction should this PhD take after this particular finding). You'll probably be leading a course or two, which you'll have some degree of autonomy over the content, structure, and assessment. You're also now a cog in the machine of the structures of your department and your wider institution. You probably have an administrative role, where you make decisions relating a diverse range of things from ethical approval of research projects to ways to the recruitment of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. There's not much in the way of a safety net either – in most cases, no one will be screening your decisions, and it rapidly becomes unviable to ask for advice in every instance. You're on your own, with no formal training. But you actually have probably got here by being reasonably decisive anyway. And you learn by doing. In my experience, the environment has been friendly and forgiving enough that there are consequences when things don't go as expected.

The article about this, and other topics, can be found on my blog: https://gavinbuckingham.wordpress.com.

## What is your approach for supervising a large number of undergraduate students?

With difficulty! As a postdoc, I'd overseen the project of one extremely good student a year. As faculty, that number went up to around eight, with varying degrees of enthusiasm for conducting a research project (in the UK, an honors research project is a mandatory part of most science degrees). Initially, I'd have a whiteboard in my office with all my students' names and a grid of all their key milestones (project proposal, ethics application, data collection, etc.) so that I could tick them off and keep track of their progress. Now I'm using the same project management software I use with my PhD students (Basecamp) to keep track of their projects – this means I can send messages to them as a group and also have individual chats with

them. Email contact is just a bit too unwieldy for the mixture of trivial and complicated queries which make a dissertation project. Also, while I like my students generally to be working on individual projects, I like to bring them together at least twice – first a few weeks into term to give each other an overview of their projects and then a few weeks before submission of their first drafts to present their findings to one another. Some students don't engage at all with this aspect (which is fine), but some really seem to benefit from this introduction to lab culture. Finally, try to be practical about your own workload. Initially, my aim was for all students to undertake a significant research project which was in my wheelhouse. These days, I let students have far more choice in what it is they want to do which frees up a lot of lab congestion – particularly critical now that I have a few PhD students. Something this year I'm trying is also to have a student supervised by each of my later-year PhD students on an "arm" of their current work – I really enjoyed this experience as a PhD student, so I'm hoping it will work out nicely from this more meta-perspective.

## What is your advice for supervising your first PhD student?

Tough to give one-size-fits-all advice here because every student is so different – you want to try to be flexible enough to adjust to their needs (which themselves might vary over time) while teaching them the technical skills, methods of project management, and writing styles which you think will make them better scientists. As I've gone on in my career, I have become generally more hands-off with regard to the oversight of the project itself (often rarely more than a sounding board for the decisions they have made themselves) and more hands-on with making sure my students are doing ok in the bigger scheme of things. I now tend to have weekly individual short meetings (longer if significant project content needs discussion) and a weekly group lab meeting, as well as regular chat-style interactions throughout the week. And really a lot of this discussion is social rather than work. This pastoral care element I think is really critical because your goal as a supervisor is to get them through the process more prepared for a life as a scientist than they were before, rather than to mold them into new and improved versions of yourself. I know plenty of people who came out of their doctoral training with a ton of publications, but no desire to continue on. All that said, don't neglect their training in the early days when they have capacity. Things I'm particularly keen on making sure trainees pick up some skills in are (in no particular order) programming, good data management, good data visualization, clear and easy-to-understand writing, and open science. Note that all these skills are very highly regarded outside of academia, which is becoming increasingly key. Many (statistically, the majority) of your trainees will end up in careers outside of academia, and this should not be viewed as a failure on either your part or their part. Most important advice I can give though in this regard is not to heap expectations based on your own experience and trajectory (which, if you have got to the stage of supervising PhD students, is pretty exceptional). You

don't need to push them to succeed. You need to support them in whatever their definition of success, inside and outside of the lab, happens to be. They are not a resource to be utilized, but individuals you are supposed to be training.

## What do you like most about your work?

I really enjoy the hectic multitude of jobs I get to complete in any one day and the sense of pride I get from keeping all the balls (just about) in the air. I also really enjoy the mentorship of students – particularly my PhD students.

## And what do you like least about your work?

I think that the reward structures are rather poor (although possibly not poor compared to the rest of society, but that's a conversation for another day). But a lot of the promotion in UK academia hinges upon income generation rather than the generation of knowledge. I'm pragmatic enough to understand why the university is interested in income generation but feel that absolute amount of money won, in an ecosystem where there's often a 10% chance of success, does not motivate academics to become well rounded (or happy!). I'd guess that promotion based on overall job performance (however we characterize that), including funding applied for rather than funds generated, would have a multitude of good effects on the academic ecosystem.

## You currently work at the University of Exeter, but this isn't where you first were hired as faculty. Can you tell us a bit about why you looked for another faculty position?

My first position was in a historically small department which was being grown rapidly. I was hired as part of a push to hire research-intensive academics to boost the department's research ratings. This had many advantages – I didn't teach as much as some of my colleagues, and I had a pretty hefty startup package (at least for a UK academic, where we don't fare particularly well). But as we went on, I became frustrated with how the university was being managed at multiple levels and was left with the growing sense that the good times were over with regard to my protected position, particularly as they'd been making it pretty clear to me that I was underperforming in their eyes (i.e., not bringing in enough grant income). A promotion attempt got knocked back without any concrete description of what I'd need to do to get promoted, and at that point, I decided it was time to start looking around. At

this point, my partner was also keen to move to a (slightly) warmer part of the world, and our child was young enough that we felt that a move wouldn't be disruptive at all. So the barriers seemed few, and it was exciting to try to imagine other potential future lives. I had a few interviews without success (in which I felt I learned a lot quite quickly) and then one which was successful before also being offered my current post. When offered the job, it was a scary proposition – not so much the move itself (which would be considered an upgrade in terms of university rank, for what that's worth), but moving out of my home discipline (psychology) into a new one (sport and health sciences). It's been an unambiguously good move for me though, and I'm incredibly happy with my life and work.

**Thanks for telling us more about that process. I think that aspect – considering moving to another university – is particularly mystifying for those still figuring out what it's like to be in a faculty position. Can you elaborate on some of what you learned from those unsuccessful interviews?**

I think that the main mistake I made during my unsuccessful interview was that I simply answered the questions that were asked. What I should have done was to use the questions asked in the interviews as a mechanism to demonstrate my suitability for the post, fit with the department, and knowledge of the university sector. By the time I got this right, I felt like I was able to give reasonably elaborate and knowledgeable-seeming answers to the questions being asked. I also became a lot more open – one of the reasons I wanted to move was that I was genuinely excited about the opportunities that would be presented at these other places. And letting the interview panel see that enthusiasm probably didn't hurt. This, of course, gets easier with experience – it's a lot easier to move "laterally" (from one lectureship to another) than it is to get your first position, so as things went on, I felt more confident, even with the unsuccessful ones.

**Based on your journey, what advice or suggestions do you want to pass on to someone who's currently finishing their PhD?**

Don't feel that your PhD (the experience, your workload, your stresses, or even the research you have been doing) needs to define your career. My time doing a postdoctoral fellowship became far more relevant to the research I do these days, as well as broadening my horizons and giving me a wider sense of what an academic career could be like. Many people come out of their PhD thinking that they certainly don't want to spend any more time doing that. But rest assured, you won't. The

environment will change. Your relationship with your supervisor will change. Your responsibilities will change. Even your research will change (if you want it to). One of the great things about academia is that, at all levels, there are opportunities to shake it up if you are getting bored and disheartened with what you spend your day doing.

## Is there anything else you'd like to tell someone reading this interview?

I think that it can be very easy to feel like an unappreciated cog in a large machine, whatever career stage you might be in. For me, this was particularly obvious when I was starting out as a lecturer – a huge number of tasks are pointed your way without a great sense of what their purpose might be. But getting more involved in higher-level institutional opportunities (joining the Senate, feeding back into focus groups, etc.) can be a really valuable way to get an insight into the drivers of the university – what makes them tick and why they make the decisions they do. Because in the UK universities are not profit-making enterprises, finding out the narrative behind some of the more cutthroat-seeming decisions is surprisingly relieving. And as an early-career researcher, you'll find that your views are more valued than you'd expect at college or university-level committees – the people at the top of a university are aware that there's rarely a "voice" for the early-career individuals at these committees but typically unable to find people – so put yourself forward and/or seek out these opportunities.

**Thank you for all of the advice and perspectives. They are much appreciated!**